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ABSTRACT

Reading instruction and placing students into groups emphasizes a plethora of approaches. Each method of grouping for instructional purposes should stress providing for learners' individual purposes. Which plans are appropriate for grouping students for reading instruction? Team teaching has many advocates, but it has both advantages and disadvantages. Departmentalized teaching stresses a separate teacher for all or some of the grade levels in reading instruction. A teacher specializes in the teaching of reading and can build instructional skills based solely on reading. But departmentalized instruction as compared to the self-contained classroom will continue to be debated. Prior to the 1950s there were still many one-room schoolhouses. Presently in selected elementary schools, grades 1 and 2 may be located in one classroom, and this is now labeled interage grouping. It, too, has advantages and disadvantages. There are not nearly the problems involved in grouping when individualized reading is in operation. With this method, the student chooses a library book to read and conferences with the classroom teacher afterwards. Teaching the basics in reading has long been advocated. The use of carefully chosen basal readers might well stress a basics curriculum. Basal readers have been in existence since the McGuffey Readers were first published in 1837. The Core Knowledge Foundation (Hirsch, 1999) represents an additional basics approach in teaching reading. E. D. Hirsch advocates that school districts identify core topics and emphasize these in selected grades. During the 1960s some educators advocated what was called the nongraded school. Every teacher needs to ungrade reading instruction since few students read on grade level. One solution would be for teachers to use the best from each grouping procedure. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

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Reading, Grouping, and the Student.

by Marlow Ediger

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1

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READING, GROUPING, AND THE STUDENT

Reading instruction and placing students into groups emphasizes a plethora of approaches. Each method of grouping for instructional purposes should stress providing for individual differences among learners. Students individually should achieve as optimally as possible. Which plan is then appropriate for grouping students for reading instruction?

Reading and Team Teaching

Team teaching advocates are many. They believe that large group instruction should generally come first in instruction. With large group instruction, two are more teachers plan the objectives, learning opportunities, and individual endeavors for teaching and learning situations. The combined minds of a team should be better than a single teacher in planning for large group instruction. In the planning session, ideas for instruction may be evaluated by the team, rather than by one teacher. Team members may learn from each other in the process. Thus, inservice education is involved during planning sessions. The teacher who does best in teaching the large group should then be in charge of instruction at this point. The strengths of the teacher need to be used. It might be that rotating among team members is the best way to emphasize who teaches students in large group instruction (Ediger and Rao, 2000, Chapter Eight).

Team members can then observe each other teach reading in large group instruction. Assessing each other in teaching is then possible. Video-taping and using rating scales with quality reading teaching behaviors therein might well facilitate the assessment process.

From large group instruction to small group/committee endeavors may assist students to elaborate on or raise questions about the large group instruction session. Here, students may have clarified what was not understood in the large group session. Each team member helps to supervise committees at work in the classroom.

From small group instruction to individual work for students makes it possible for each learner also to pursue personal interests in reading. All team members need to be available to assist individual students to achieve optimally in reading instruction.

Advantages of team teaching include the following:

1. team members can learn from each other when quality standards are followed in planning sessions.

2. evaluating ideas for teaching reading within a team can make for improved reading instruction.

3. the teacher is not alone in the instructional arena but can receive assistance from team members.

4. reading teachers have opportunities to work in a variety of situations such as large group, committee, and student individual endeavors.

5. students receive increased supervision given by all members of the team.

Disadvantages of team teaching are the following:

1. human relations among team members may be a problem.

2. it is time consuming to plan within a group, rather than singularly.

3. finding time for all in planing can be a major problem during the school day.

4. it becomes increasingly difficult to provide for individual differences when large group instruction of students has more than thirty members.

5. much scheduling goes into planning for each of the three levels of instruction— large group, committees, and individual endeavors (Ediger, 1995, 7- 20).

Departmentalization in Reading Instruction

Departmentalized teaching stresses a separate teacher for all or some of the grade levels in reading instruction. Each of the other curriculum areas may also be departmentalized with specially trained teachers for teaching each curriculum area. The teacher then specializes in the teaching of reading and can build instructional skills based on reading solely. He/she might then teach reading only on several grade levels if the school is smaller in size as compared to teaching reading solely on one or two grade levels in a larger school setting

Advantages for departmentalized reading instruction include the following:

1. the teacher may concentrate on one curriculum area only in specializing and planning for instruction.

2. the teacher might plan together with selected teachers from other academic disciplines to offer a more integrated curriculum.

Disadvantages of departmentalized teaching include the following:

1. it tends to isolate curriculum areas unless there is a

definite effort to plan increased integration of subject matter with other teachers.

2. It makes it more difficult for students to perceive the relationship of knowledge as compared to the self contained classroom.

3. It makes it more difficult for young learners to relate to a single person since there are numerous teachers involved in departmentalization when each takes his/her turn in teaching a different curriculum to students (Ediger, 1995, 77-79).

Departmentalized instruction as compared to the self contained classroom, no doubt, will continue to be debated as it has in the past.

Interage Grouping for Reading Instruction

Prior to the 1950s, there still were many one room school houses. Then younger children were taught together with older children in some classes so that the teacher could make the rounds with teaching all required curriculum areas within a school day. The author taught in a two teacher school during the 1955-1957 school years. There were 20 pupils in grades five through eight in his classroom. The other teacher taught grades one through four. Fifth and sixth as well as seventh and eighth graders were always combined in teaching mathematics, social studies, science, and reading/literature. This made it possible to teach all four grade levels and still make the rounds in teaching all curriculum areas in a school day. Interage grouping was then involved.

Presently in selected elementary schools, grades one and two may be located in one classroom throughout the school days. This is generally due to having an overflow of first and second graders from two classrooms and yet funds are limited to hire another teacher so that there are only first graders in one classroom and only second graders in the other classroom. The overflow from two classrooms of first and second graders makes for the combination room of first and second graders. Within the combination room, first and second graders may be taught together in selected curriculum areas. Interage grouping is then involved. This is the teacher's decision to do so to provide for individual differences among learners. Sometimes, grade levels mean little in terms of how well student's are achieving. Thus, for example, a third grader reads better than does a fifth grader.

Advantages for interage grouping are the following:

1. age levels in school classrooms may harmonize more

with what exists in society where individuals of different age levels interact with others freely.

2. grade level distinctions may not be too meaningful in terms of student achievement with selected younger children in school achieving at a higher level as compared to older students.

3. younger gifted students may feel challenged and benefit from instruction when being taught with older learners.

Disadvantages of interage grouping might well be the following:

1. socially, there may be differences in student development which may hinder interage academic achievement in grouping for instruction.

2. no matter how students are grouped for instruction, there are individual differences which must be provided for. Thus, the interage versus age level grouping which is typical in most schools debate will predominate.

3. students may be placed into an interage group for which they are not ready. This would be true when interage grouping is the thing in placing learners into groups (Ediger, 1995, Chapter Eight).

Individualized Instruction in Reading

There are not nearly the problems involved in grouping when individualized reading is in operation. In fact, there is actually one student in a group when individualized reading is emphasized in the classroom. Thus from a wide range of genre and reading levels, the student chooses a library book to read. After the reading of that book has been completed, the student has a conference with the teacher to evaluate comprehension and fluency in reading. The student then chooses sequential library books to read with conferences involving the classroom teacher coming after each library book has been read. This is an abbreviated model of one plan of individualized reading. Advantages for individualized reading used as a grouping plan are the following:

1. individual differences can truly be provided for when the learner chooses reading materials of personal interest and on his/her unique reading level.

2. individuals need not be compared with others, but can achieve against their own unique previous achievement level.

3. the homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping debate does not apply when individualized reading is being

emphasized.

Disadvantages for stressing individualized reading include he following:

1. social theory is not being emphasized since the learner continually works by the self. It is good to have some kind of balance between group work and individual endeavors.
2. there may be selected skills which all learners in a classroom could benefit from. These might well be taught in large group instruction.
3. many schools lack a good selection of library books for students to make choices in a quality individualized reading program (See Scherer, 2001, p. 5).

The Basics in Reading

There have long been advocates of teaching the basics in reading. William Chandler Bagley (1874-1946) was a strong supporter of the basics, as a philosophy of education, in the early 1900s. Dr. Bagley believed there were too many frills and fads taught in the pubic schools in his day. The basics then needed to be identified and taught. It is difficult to say which the basics in the curriculum are. In many cases the basals by educational conservatives consist of teaching solid subject matter, heavy emphasis upon phonics instruction, eading classical literature, drill and practice, strong discipline procedures, and teacher directed student learning in reading (Bagley, 1934).

The use of carefully chosen basal readers might well stress a basics curriculum. Basal reading stories are chosen by the authors of these textbooks. They are arranged in sequence. Basals in a series are arranged by grade level. Each grade level has one or more basals for students in learning to read at an increasingly complex level. An accompanying teacher's Manual is used by teachers to implement selected objectives in teaching and learning situations. There are recommended learning opportunities in the Manual to use in reading instruction. Evaluation techniques, too, are listed in the Manual to ascertain how much students have learned and achieved in reading.

Advantages given for stressing a basics approach in reading instruction are the following:

1. it provides security in reading instruction since the basal and accompanying Manual are there to offer assistance to the teacher.

2. basals tend to follow a certain sequence which might assist learners to also perceive order in learning.

3. basal readers have stood the test of time in having been used in teaching reading. Basals have been in existence since 1837 when the Mc Guffey Readers were first published.

Disadvantages of using basal readers might be the following:

1. they tend to stultify creativity in teaching when the teacher rigidly follows the Manual for choosing objectives, learning activities, and evaluation procedures.

2. they do not meet the interest needs of individual students in reading when the latter had no input into the selection of stories to be read.

3. they should not be used as the sole method of reading instruction. Other materials of teaching reading should also be used such as library books for learners to read (Ediger, 1997, Chapter Nine).

A further example of the basics are state mandated objectives for students to achieve. These objectives, developed on the state level, then need to be emphasized in teaching and learning situations. State mandated tests which are aligned with the objectives are given periodically on selected grade levels as determined by the individual state. There might evan be an exit test in which a student needs to achieve at a certain percentile level in order to receive a high school diploma. What is stated in the objectives of reading instruction and the accompanying test items might well be conceived as the basics. There are selected debates in reading instruction which indicate problems in selecting the basics for student achievement. These issues, among others, include the following:

1. whole language versus a heavy emphasis upon phonics instruction.

2. a logical versus a psychological procedure of reading instruction.

3. state mandated testing versus portfolio development to ascertain student achievement and progress.

The Core Knowledge Foundation (E. D. Hirsch, 1999) represents an additional basics approach in teaching reading. Hirsch advocates that school districts identify core topics for teaching. By identifying core topics and emphasizing these in selected grades, gaps and repetition in teaching and learning might be avoided. Core knowledge taught provides background information for students. The background information may then

be used to teach related specifics such as facts. This also helps to minimize the following issues;

1. how much of depth teaching as compared to specific information to be taught, related to the core ideas.
2. how much of depth teaching as compared to breadth of content (Hirsch, 2001).

Thus, in depth teaching, there is room for both the core knowledge (broad generalizations) and the related specifics related to the core. There is not time for the teacher to teach everything in depth; some of the subject matter may then need to be taught using survey approaches. How many topics (breadth) can be taught within a unit and how much depth may be stressed for each topic will depend upon the core knowledge identified. Core knowledge, or background information, is highly relevant when a new lesson or unit is introduced in the teaching of reading. Discussions need to be held among teachers as to which approach in grouping students makes for higher achievement in reading. Open ended discussions are necessary. They are a good way of stressing that teachers work together and are actively involved in developing the reading curriculum

The Nongraded School

Every teacher needs to ungrade reading instruction since few students read on grade level. Students are at different levels of reading achievement. If reading at or on grade level is the ideal, selected students may read two to three grade levels above as well as some who read two or three grade levels below that mark. Others will read in between the two to three grade levels above as well as two to three grade levels below grade level. Even those who read on grade level do differ from each other in terms of interests and purposes in reading. Thus, there needs to be a wide variety of genre as to which topic is of interest to the reader. Not all, of course, have the same or similar interests then in reading.

individualized reading stresses nongradedness when students individually choose their very own library books to read. The complexity level of the library book chosen will differ from student to student as will the topic selected to read. Each is at a different achievement level in reading not only in complexity of the library book being read but also in content or subject matter interest.

Teachers using basal readers may group student into three

reading groups within a classroom. Each group will then be as homogeneous as possible. There are educators who are against homogeneous grouping since this is a form of tracking. According to these advocates, the slower achievers receive less sophisticated knowledge as compared to those in the faster achieving groups. The readers used by the slower groups may be written for those who read below grade level (Ediger, 1996, 271- 275).

During the early 1960s, there were educators who advocated what was called the nongraded school. If, for example, there are six roomfuls of first graders, they would be grouped homogeneously. The top roomful of first graders may be reading on the third grade level, approximately. The bottom roomful of students may be reading on the pre primer level. Appropriate reading materials would then be used to meet learner needs in reading based on achievement. Within the top roomful of achievers, there would be further grouping. Thus, there would be faster, average, and slower achievers within the top roomful of homogeneously grouped students. Each of these three groups is taught separately using readers appropriate for their respective levels of complexity. The very top group sequentially may be reading from a fifth grade reader by the time they are in what normally is the second grade. Each reading group within a classroom starts the next school year with where they left off the previous school year. ideally, a seamless reading curriculum is in evidence for all students in the nongraded school. There is no social promotion within a nongraded school since students are taken where they are presently in reading achievement and then assisted to achieve as much as possible sequentially throughout the school years (See Goodlad, 1966).

The nongraded school had the following assets:

1. there are no failures in that students would be placed within a group whereby the complexity levels of reading materials used ideally would harmonize with their present individual level of reading attainment.

2. there would be a reading program for each child within a group which would stress continuous progress. There would be no skipping of skills taught nor would there be repetition of what was taught previously. Thus, no gaps nor duplication of reading objectives would be in evidence in the nongraded school.

3. continuous progress in reading achievement is emphasized. No child is failing nor is any student being socially promoted with the nongraded philosophy of reading instruction.

Disadvantages of the nongraded school are the following:

1. it is undemocratic, according to selected educators, to track or group students homogeneously. For example, the top achievers would acquire the more complex ideas which puts them even further ahead of those in the slower groups in reading instruction. The slower groups would be doomed in society because of having received the less sophisticated teaching in reading instruction.
2. it segregates students into different levels of quality in reading rather than helping all students to attain that which makes for optimal achievement in the societal arena.
3. it makes for gaps in reading achievement levels among what are the slower as compared to the faster reading achievement groups. Minority groups will usually be placed into the slower reading groups.

In Closing

It would be excellent if the best from each grouping procedure discussed could be used such as

1. teachers learning from each other as in team teaching.
2. teachers with specialized knowledge in the teaching of reading being actively involved in instructing students to read. Departmentalized instruction stresses the importance of the teacher teaching in his/her academic area of specialization.
3. individual differences provided for as in individualized reading. Students involved in individualized reading select and pace their very own unique levels of reading progress.
4. students acquiring what is basic in learning to read fluently and effectively with comprehension involved.
5. teachers nongrading the reading curriculum so that each learner is successful in achievement.

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